“DIFFERENT SHOULDN’T MEAN DISADVANTAGED”: EXPLORING THE NEEDS AND SUCCESSFUL APPROACHES OF URBAN, AFRICAN-AMERICAN DOMINANT SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

This position demonstrates the current differences that exist between urban and suburban schools, and these differences are not currently being accommodated due to the focus of standardization of exams and meeting state standards. Because there is not an adequate preparation strategy for educating diverse backgrounds of students from varying socioeconomic backgrounds, teacher burnout and attrition have become more likely. Urban teachers who teach in African-American dominant classrooms should be encouraged to promote culturally relevant strategies into their teaching strategies. The literature supports a multicultural representation of a different race or ethnic background by including more culturally relevant elements into our lesson design within urban school settings, as educational settings, as our current course curriculums are not accurately representing our students. This could potentially lead to a disadvantage in urban schools, because the curriculum are not representative of the members who learn it. One suggestion the literature calls for is for more culturally relevant pedagogical strategies to be implemented in teaching. Culturally responsive teaching provides a distinct advantage toward helping African American students succeed, through the use of integrating context-specific standards within a content-demanding curriculum. The literature supports culturally relevant pedagogy as a strategy to implement in urban school settings, because it helps to establish student autonomy, leadership, better understanding of perspectives and different cultural backgrounds, and most importantly, further engagement and motivation for students. It is suggested that teachers take the time to learn the tenets that revolve around culturally relevant pedagogy, and teach these ideals their diverse body of students. It is also important of educational leadership to first perform a critical race analysis of the traditional structures being held within their educational environments, as they can recognize potential biases associated with their curriculum. From there, it is suggested that changes be made, and opportunities be provided for teachers to learn and promote culturally relevant teaching strategies as a culture within the school.

Keywords: urban education, culturally relevant pedagogy, urban needs, African-American students, curriculum change.
1. Introduction

For over a century, United States schools’ curricula have placed heavy emphasis on learning subject matter in order to gain strength in academic areas. Comprehension and successful test scores have become the goal for students to graduate from high school. Though this does provide more accountability to promote student success, it has also left teachers limited to following a narrowed curriculum that strictly focuses on subject matter that does not provide much time for equity and learning about the actual needs of students. In urban school settings, especially those that are predominantly African American, opportunities for application and evaluation of learning from students and teachers are pushed aside in order to meet the requirements of a standardized exam. Leland and Murtadha (2011) suggest that in order for urban school educators to gain a sense of self-sufficiency and avoid potential burnout and attrition, they need to be supported in their integration of new ideas in the curriculum, so that they can best reach their students. This concept drives the desire to further explore and investigate how race has a major impact on the educational practices of schools in urban contexts. First, it should be explored how urban schools are different than suburban or rural schools, especially in understanding the value of race, and what needs are required to ensure a better education.

2. Urban Schools’ Differences and Needs

Urban schools are different than suburban and rural schools “because they educate large numbers of poor students from diverse racial, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural backgrounds” (Boggess, 2010, p.66). Because of this, Milner (2013) suggests that we are underserving African American students who are not exposed to a rigorous, responsive, and innovative curriculum, which can ultimately cause students to possess a lack of desire and motivation to gain success in those subject areas. To improve our education for urban schools, especially those that have a great percentage of African American children, more support for innovative and culturally relevant ideas is necessary for urban students to strive, and for teachers to gain credibility in their teaching methods. In predominantly African American contexts, it is on the administration and teachers to provide new and innovative approaches to reach the diverse group of students they connect with.

For students in urban schools, especially African-American dominant school settings, culturally responsive teaching has been a strong gauge of helping students create significant connections between content material and real-world application to current situations that students see within their surroundings. Students in urban settings and suburban settings demonstrated key differences in their achievement scores, the most significant reason being indicated that differences in family background and race were not explored within the school context (Sandy & Duncan, 2010). Promoting a multicultural representation of a different race or ethnic background can present arduous obstacles if we do not have the understanding or resources to bring in more culturally relevant elements into our lesson design.

Schmeichel (2012) argued for further examination of the approaches toward properly promoting equity when educators have primarily created a sense of difference within classroom environments. Because different needs, concerns, and environmental factors cause different outcomes within urban schools, current pedagogical strategies and approaches toward effective leadership should be repaired, in order to improve the level of success for African American students in urban educational settings.
3. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Culturally relevant pedagogy, especially in association with urban education, has demonstrated a positive impact on students, because it implements a high level of application to a student’s background and creates a connection of care between teacher and student. It is grounded in teaching sincerity, ethics, and understanding of other people’s backgrounds in order to make fair and just decisions in learning.

Ladson-Billings (1995) originally developed the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy to develop strong instructional approaches that focused on addressing current disadvantages that existed for students of a different color or background, so that they could be provided the opportunity to share their perspective and be provided further opportunity to succeed. She furthered her research recently by focusing on the principle that culturally relevant pedagogy should be sustained as cyclical as a practice, as it should not be addressed as a one-time approach to promote success (Ladson-Billings, 2014). In promoting culturally relevant pedagogy as an approach to provide opportunities for all races, ethnicities, and backgrounds to be represented within the context of lessons, students not only become more aware of their value, they demonstrate further success in the classroom environment.

One study explained the mission of this educational theory, stating that “Culturally responsive teaching...reflects a system of moral principles aligned with the interrelated components of a care-based education (Shevalier & McKenzie, 2012, p.1100).” School administrations should provide most opportunity and autonomy for teachers to create care-based lessons that revolve around culturally relevant topics that matter to students. Schmeichel (2012) discussed that culturally responsive, or relevant, teaching not only demonstrates the value of using discourse to discuss the power of difference, it provides avenues for students of color to have opportunities to be noticed and be provided for more opportunity for success. If race is a factor within the school district, then race needs to be a changing factor in lesson design, and that can only be accomplished with an innovative administration willing to take risks to enhance African American education.

Culturally responsive teaching does provide a distinct advantage toward helping African American students succeed, through the use of integrating context-specific standards within a content-demanding curriculum. The argument that stems from this approach is that culturally responsive teaching is not meant to be a prescription-based approach, but rather a universal theory designed toward providing one avenue of toward understanding one’s own and others’ backgrounds and situations. Fraise and Brooks (2015) discuss that teachers and students need to take the time for deep reflection on their own culture and values, merge their own experiences with those of their students’ cultures and values, and utilize them within the contexts of their teaching.

The literature suggests that there should be the overall understanding that race, ethnicity, and culture ultimately affects our curriculum, and providing as many opportunities to enhance that curriculum with cultural impressions will only benefit students who come from a different racial background. It is a systemic epidemic that requires deep reflection, expertise from several races of successful administrators and teachers, and willingness to explore new avenues that promote achievement for students who need it most.
4. Suggestion for Transformative Leadership

One improvement that could be made is to provide better examples of transformative leadership within the politics of education when it comes to supporting culturally relevant education. A critical race analysis would be required first because researchers need to identify the traditional structures that inhibit discussion and questioning techniques holding African American students back. Lerma, Linick, Warren-Grice, and Parker (2013) explain that “A critical race analysis in the politics of education challenges individuals to analyze race, class, and gender privileges within both formal and informal structures and schooling process” (p.36).

Once a holistic analysis has been done, it is valuable to critically reflect on examples that have made a tremendous impact in students’ lives. Approaching leadership in this manner would not only provide more motivation for all students to want to become powerful citizens in their communities, but could also potentially provide motivation for state and county leaders to change existing political practices that are potentially geared for White students.

5. Conclusion and Future Recommendation

This position promoted a need to address the current issues that exist between urban, African-American contexts, and suburban, White contexts. Urban contexts promote different issues including higher socioeconomic concerns, larger class sizes, and a lack of preparedness for teachers who are unfamiliar with those settings (Boggess, 2010; Milner, 2013). Integrating culturally responsive teaching in the urban classroom demonstrates positive effects on urban education, especially in predominantly African American schools, and promoting these contextual ideals through the use of this pedagogical strategy can deepen meaning and improve higher-order thinking skills within a given curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

This perspective calls for more focus on how race impacts current educational and political systems, as it assists to help educational leaders make informed decisions on how to move forward (Lerma, Linick, Warren-Grice, and Parker, 2013). Culturally relevant pedagogy promotes autonomy, leadership, understanding of cultural backgrounds, and motivation for students to learn, and it is suggested that teachers take the time to teach discuss and teach these ideals their urban students (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Shevalier & McKenzie, 2012). Because race is such a prevalent concept within urban settings, taking extra time to understand the cultural impact that race has on curriculum is critical because the effects could essentially make a significant impact in students’ learning.

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References


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